

Rita Capezzi--What If Nature Were All There Is?

UUFM 8-23-20

I realize the images of the albatross on Midway Island are disturbing, incredibly painful. I first experienced these images in a coffee table book, simultaneously repelled *and* moved by them. Much like the medical book my mother consulted when I was a child. It was full of pictures of people with black rectangles over their eyes, and goiters distending their throats and polio bending their legs. I wanted to look away, but I was also drawn to them in some way that at the time I thought unnatural, my fascination something I should hide.

Albatross are the top of the food chain in their part of the planet. These large seabirds, with wingspans anywhere from eight to twelve feet, are not food for anything. And so, albatross see everything else as food. Everything, including the incalculable amount of plastic trash filling the oceans. The plastic starves the birds even as they feast. And the plastic creates patterns of terrible beauty in their bodies, visible as they decay and the plastics do not.

These terrible images are the evidence of our interconnection beyond what we might normally imagine—that could be my old toothbrush, that could be my old bottle cap—inside those suffering bodies. Our human system of living, with value placed on plastic things and our reliance on them, intersects with the albatross system of living, and the consequences are dire for the birds. And hardly noticeable to most of us.

Because of where we live on this earth, we might never think about an albatross, though we might think about pollinators and toxic lawn care treatments, about waterways and tar sand pipelines. These are more immediate because our connection to them is so proximate, right there in our own backyards. Awareness of the suffering of the albatross is a reminder that there is no “outside,” no comforting distance within our human relationship to the world of other living beings. Inside and out, we are inescapably connected.

Today, I offer you a theological perspective by which to frame such terrible beauty and horrific connectedness. I offer for your consideration a way, a path, to define our practice as Unitarian Universalists and to guide and sustain the living out of our shared values and principles. This perspective is necessary, even crucial, to my own religious life. And so, I invite you to move with me in a spirit of speculation and possibility.

Religious naturalism is, like so many good things, very simple. Religious naturalism affirms that nature is all there is, there is nothing outside of nature, including humans, and that all of nature is deserving of our reverence. There is no end to nature, no edges, and so there is no center either. A reality both incomprehensible and frightening. And nature is always, continuously, birthing and destroying, at the cosmic and at the infinitesimal levels. Nature is ever-creative, “generative of an endless multiplicity of kinds and forms and modes of nature natured, of things and beings, creatures and persons, relations and events” (Hogue 120). Nature is constantly changing, in processes characterized as both vulnerable and resilient. And nature is worthy of our ultimate concern, which is to say, of our reverence.

Nature, then, is not a mere “setting” for our human lives. It is not our environment or our retreat from city and town to the lakes, rivers, beaches, and forests. Nature is always naturing—generating and undoing—in the rocks and stones, in the air and clouds, in the waters of land and sky, in the being of plants and non-human animals, in the soils of the earth and in the microbiomes of our guts, in our human interactions. For we, too, are nature. Our social and cultural manifestations emerge as part of nature. We are, in our essence, “socioecological beings.”

Often it is difficult *not* to think of ourselves as the pinnacle of nature, top of the food chain. Our Western ways of living, consumption oriented as they are, make us responsible for thinking our way out of climate catastrophe and structural injustice. Though human systems of living have dominated the earth, it is often difficult *not* to view ourselves also as nature’s best and most advanced job of work. Even as we confront both of these life-defining problems, let’s consider another view of human beings, as one manifestation of the complex and infinite systems operating and converging through all time-space.

As from our centering song today, the sky may, too, be dreaming in some way like we do. As from our meditation poem today, the “granite, pyrite, schist” of sand may, too, be sleeping in some way as we do. As from our offertory today, the earth too may cry out against war and power, even as *we* lament its scorching,” may all our cries be not in vain. These metaphors do not so much take other parts of nature to be the same as us. Rather, these metaphors invite us to think of all of nature, us included, as co-participating in a vast and mysterious dance of creation creating. As components of nature, we share likenesses. We exist together—humans, sky, sand, scorched earth, and more—beyond any binary, neither animate and inanimate, nor living and dead, nor earthly and celestial, nor human and everything else.

Our human existence as part of rather than apart from nature is not just a concept, a thought. It is not just a sentimental feeling of attachment to beautiful sunrises and mountain vistas, dew rising from wet grass and energetic twin fawns scampering out of the ravine and into what I call “my yard,” cicadas calling and hummingbirds sipping the nectar of red flowers. My human relatedness to all the rest is something I sense before I know, a vibration of correspondence in my body, a tuning with the “more” and the largeness beyond my ken. “I see more than is clear to me.” I am confident you know what I am talking about.

You know it in the melding you feel when you cradle a beloved child. It’s in the poignancy when stroking the frail skin of your lover’s hand. It’s in the delight of discovering a prairie flower you knew was out there but seemed to be playing hide and seek with you. It’s in the power you feel, the unity, when joined with others in protest against engrained injustice. It’s in the indescribable ache or bliss of connection when words fail and yet the experience, the sensation, lingers, real and vital, as you feel drawn up to the sunrise, the mountain, drawn into the dew, the antics of animals, the bravery of protest, and you feel released, if only for a moment, from your earth-bound and specifically unique body. This is when you know, like Yashoda and Krishna, that the universe is both in the dirt and in your

own mouth, that you are part of the play of the universe, converging and exploding, developing and decaying, endlessly morphing into new forms while others pass away.

All of nature, in its very nature, is both vulnerable and resilient, new birth and new death always. There is no getting around it. Our living is always precarious, not just in times such as the ones we live in now. “To be vulnerable [. . .] is to be liable to wounding, in both senses of the word—to being wounded and to being a potential cause of another’s wounding” (139). Beyond what is always true, that all living things die, our human addiction to plastic has wounded the albatross, and we are wounded by those actions and by bearing witness to them. Noticing both our culpability and our sorrow has significance. Being part and parcel of the vast Universe doesn’t get us off the hook for the ways our human living has created catastrophic effects. If we are part of the destruction, we are also intrinsically part of the potential for recreation.

Religious naturalism invites us to ask: “Can the feeling and awareness of the precarious value of life, within the larger cosmos, and in our own human lives amid a multitude of other lives, awaken us to [. . .] living as if this, our one and only world, matters ultimately?” (119). Can knowing that all of nature is in process—changing, morphing, within and beyond certainty or control—bring us to care for ourselves and our world in deeper and more active ways?

Perhaps we are too aware of our vulnerability—our capacity to be hurt, to be crushed down by derechos and tornadoes, to be crushed down by the economic and political systems, to be crushed down by each other. And each of us have the capacity to hurt—other humans and our planet, the albatross. Yet the vulnerability inherent in the universe can also evoke in us a softening of the heart, a caring spirit toward ourselves and each other. And care is how resilience is built.

Care is the root of justice. You might think the root of justice is an understanding of moral right and wrong, but that good thought isn’t enough. It is the sense that we at the root connected to one another, we are part and parcel of one another, and so we know that world should be fair and we are willing to work to make it so. Ideas can always be justified. What we need to do is get to that opening expansive feeling that reminds us we are all part of the larger fabric. No one escapes it. Life is precious because it is vulnerable. The planet is worthy of our care. We are all worthy of each other’s care.

When we feel, when we know, when we sense finally, that we are part of vast vulnerable and resilient nature, we may practice our whole lives religiously, through “contemplation, inquiry, and moral practice devoted to the beauty and creativity of nature naturing” (140). We might then choose a humble religious path, no longer the center of the universe but attuned to its broader rhythms. We might leave off “questing for certainty or resting in faith, [instead pursuing an] appreciative search for the value of things.” And an appreciative search adds value into the universe by noticing and revering the depth of value already there.

All is nature. There is nothing but nature. We are nature. And nature is full of value, worthy of our reverence. The interdependent web of all existence includes the world humans did not create as well as

the worlds we have created. May our lives be built with and infused by awareness of this deep connectedness. When one of us raises a voice for compassion, for kindness, for justice, we will find those values out in a world full of others making that same choice. Together we help each other through, together, each in our own unique and precious being harmonizing in love and trust. May you feel joy in knowing we are all bound together in mystery, vulnerable and capable of making choices for what is good and just, as you remember, today and every day, that you are loved, you are worthy, you are welcome, and you are needed. May you feel it so, may it be so. And may we say as a people together, Amen.

Additional Reference:

Hogue, Michael S. *American Immanence: Democracy for an Uncertain World*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018.

DO NOT REPRODUCE